

# SPAZI E TEMPI DELL'ALTERITÀ



*a cura di*

**Daniele Gallo**

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# Representing the Mystical Otherness. Padre Pio's Mystical Experience in Words and Images

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

A full 20 years after his canonization and 54 years after his death, Padre Pio of Pietrelcina's cult is still popular and widespread. One of Padre Pio of Pietrelcina's most noteworthy features is his mystical experience. In his writings he presents this experience as an encounter with the divine and describes perceiving it as otherness inhabiting and obliterating his own self. Padre Pio outlines his quest in letters to his spiritual directors, father Benedetto and Agostino of San Marco in Lamis.<sup>2</sup>

What happens when mystical writing is translated into a different semiotic system, such as cinema? To answer this question, we will analyse an interesting TV movie: *Padre Pio da Pietrelcina*, directed by Alberto Rondalli and distributed by the Italian public network RAI in 1998.<sup>3</sup> For comparative purposes, we will also refer to a second TV movie from the same period, *Padre Pio*, directed by Carlo Carlei and distributed by Mediaset in 2000.<sup>4</sup>

To give an outline of the paper, we will first define alterity in relation to the semiotic functions implied by the natural world of experience and common sense, understood as a component of a specific culture whose form is produced by a projection on the basis of language and other semiotic systems. Second, we will investigate Rondalli's movie about Padre Pio by focusing on the stylistic choices made in representing the mystic's relationship with God. Third, we will analyse Carlei's movie and compare the two different tactics, aimed at ellipsis and emphasis respectively. Finally, we will draw some conclusions about the different effects the two contrasting choices have on the production of the experienced world, and propose

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1. This paper is part of the research project NeMoSanctI (New Models of Sanctity in Italy (1960s-2000s) — A Semiotic Analysis of Norms, Causes of Saints, Hagiography, and Narratives), which has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 757314).

2. Pietrelcina, P., *Epistolario I: corrispondenza con i direttori spirituali (1910-1922)*, Edizioni "Padre Pio da Pietrelcina", San Giovanni Rotondo, 1971, trad. eng. *Letters I: correspondence with his spiritual directors (1910-1922)*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Edizioni "Padre Pio da Pietrelcina", San Giovanni Rotondo, 2012.

3. Accessed via RaiPlay October 26<sup>th</sup> 2020, <https://www.raiplay.it/video/2017/05/Padre-Pio-da-Pietrelcina-53d92f64-36c7-432c-afe2-0ce4502c2c1b.html>.

4. <https://www.mediasetplay.mediaset.it/>. Accessed October 26<sup>th</sup> 2020. The movie is based on Allegri, R., *Padre Pio: un santo tra noi*, Milan, Mondadori, 1998. The author, a journalist and music critic, is also identified in the credits as a historical consultant for the movie.

an interpretation of the semiotic function of the irrepresentability of the mystical union between creature and creator.

## 1. Defining alterity

This paper presents an analysis and comparison of two movies that translate Padre Pio's mystical writings about his relationship with the Divine into visual terms. We identify the divine as it is addressed by mystic discourse with 'alterity', the topic of this volume. This preliminary section is dedicated to justifying this choice and more fully defining the term alterity.

According to the online Cambridge Dictionary, 'otherness' is defined as 'being or feeling different in appearance or character from what is familiar, expected, or generally accepted'. For example, «In the film, he is able to depict the sense of otherness and alienation that many teenagers feel». <sup>5</sup> For 'alterity', the online Merriam-Webster dictionary offers as a definition 'the quality or state of being radically alien to the conscious self or a particular cultural orientation'. For instance, «Bourdain's magic lies in his capacity to formulate the most updated representation of readily consumable alterity». <sup>6</sup> The two definitions have much in common: they denote difference in terms of knowledge of a subject embodied by either a collective actor or an individual one. 'Alter' and 'other' are related as well, in that the former means the 'other of two'. The two terms play a similar indexical function: having identified and defined something as a reference, 'other' indicates something else, something which is 'different', not included, additional, alien or exotic. To illustrate, «The driver's wife [Defined, individuated reference point] and two other passengers [additional, vague indexed references, different from the first] were injured in the accident».

The pronoun/adjective 'other' has the crucial function of cloaking the definition of the indexed reference in vagueness. It is the label of the 'residual category' thanks to which it is possible to complete every classification. It even allows the enunciator to refer to indefinable entities.

Furthermore, every enunciate presupposes an 'other' of a peculiar kind, expressed by the principle of inherence: «An object, or in general an element, cannot be what it is, cannot be of any value (...) if not in the face of an instance thanks to which, according to which, it takes on value, an instance which 'intentionates' it». <sup>7</sup>

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5. Accessed January, 22<sup>nd</sup> 2020, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/otherness>.

6. Accessed January, 22<sup>nd</sup> 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/alterity#examples>.

7. Marsciani, F., À propos de quelques questions inactuelles en théorie de la signification, *Actes Sémiotiques*, 2014, 117, p. 19. Accessed January 22<sup>nd</sup> 2020 <https://www.unilim.fr/actes-semiotiques/5279>.



Together with the principles of difference and recursiveness, the aforementioned principle of inherence expresses a condition of possibility of meaning. The three principles seek to synthesize the Saussurean, phenomenological, and generative notions of value, respectively. Each of them expresses a condition of possibility of meaning. Thus, every semiotic system presupposes a unique 'other' that constitutes the source and condition of semantic value or, to coin a neologism, the 'valueness' of value.

### *1.1. Mystical discourse and the absolute other*

Given the different notions of 'other' mentioned above, mystical writing can be considered discourse about an absolute 'other'. The totality of the defining traits of the world of experience is assumed as the reference point to introduce this 'other'; it is different from everything and indefinable. At the same time, this 'other' is the source of all the immanent value of the aforementioned world. The best example of this point is found in Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite's *Mystical theology*. This brief treatise is the most influential expression of apophatic theology, attempting as it does to specify only what may not be said about God. In particular, God is above existent beings (ὕπεροῦστος), since existent beings are limited. Therefore,

[...] neither is there expression of It, nor name, nor knowledge; neither is It darkness, nor light; nor error, nor truth; neither is there any definition at all of It, nor any abstraction. But when making the predications and abstractions of things after It, we neither predicate, nor abstract from It; since the all-perfect and uniform Cause of all is both above every definition and the pre-eminence of Him, Who is absolutely freed from all, and beyond the whole, is also above every abstraction.<sup>8</sup>

In semiotic terms, even if it is possible to refer to this 'absolute other', no signifier is capable of defining its features. This absence is indeed meaningful, as we shall see. According to Algirdas J. Greimas, every text manifests an immanent semantic universe, i.e. a system of values. In turn, each universe of value presupposes a transcendent sender that is the source of these values.<sup>9</sup> A fortiori this is true about the semantic universe of a specific culture, including its specific component called 'the natural world' that is referenced and categorized by language and other semiotic systems.<sup>10</sup> Monotheistic religions, as well as different philosophical traditions, assign this semiotic function to God.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, in keeping with the principle of

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8. Trad. eng. Dionysius the Areopagite, *Works*, Parker, J. (ed.), London, James Parker and Co, 1897, p. 71.

9. Cfr. Greimas, A.J., Courtés, J., *Communication*, in Id., *Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1982, pp. 37-40: 39.

10. Cfr. Greimas, A.J., Courtés, J., *Culture*, in Id., *Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1982, pp. 37-40: 39.

11. Even secular philosophies need to assign this semiotic function. For example, this role is played by 'nature' in natural-law approaches to human rights.

inherence, if the totality of the world of experience and common sense has a meaning and a value, it presupposes an instance which ‘intentionates’ this meaning and value and is *external* to it: God plays this second function as well. God thus grants meaning and value to the world without being a part of it. He must be external to the domain of meaning to structure it. This is why we equate Him with absolute otherness or the principle of alterity. In fact, if we admit God as a meaning among other meanings, the question about the source of value would remain unanswered. God is the answer provided by culture to the question of its own validity.

### ***1.2. Is ‘absolute otherness’ a valid expression?***

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that representing the mystical union between men and God through visual signifiers abolishes the world of experience and common sense bordering on the fantastic and, sometimes, on the ridiculous, while only the elision of this representation produces the fictional world as realistic and – at the same time – succeeds in suggesting that a spiritual dimension is important in understanding the world more deeply. Is it possible to define ‘absolute alterity’ in a consistent way?

Joseph Maria Bochenski<sup>12</sup> proposed formalising the relationship between religious and prophane discourse according to the apophatic theology with the formula:

$$(F): M(t, \pi, \phi). \phi \in \alpha. \supset \sim \phi(\text{OR})$$

To put it plainly, if a term  $t$  is used in the class of profane sentences  $\pi$  as a signifier of  $\phi$ , where  $\phi$  belongs to the class of the positive properties  $\alpha$ , then the property  $\phi$  does not belong to the object of religion OR. OR is represented by God in Christian religion. The definition of ‘positive property’ is more troublesome. Bochenski suggests defining a property as ‘positive’ if it is directly perceived or a formula as positive if it contains only symbols of positive properties or terms of positive logic; he is aware, however, that such a definition restricts the class of positive properties much more stringently than the partisans of Negative Theology would have proposed.<sup>13</sup> Basing our reasoning on the semiotic considerations above, we can identify  $\alpha$  with the class of ‘figures’ belonging to the world of experience.

[...] the qualifier figurative is only used in connection with a given content\* (of a natural language, for example) when that content corresponds to something on the expression\* level of

12. Bochenski, J.M., *The logic of religion*, New York University Press, New York, 1965, p. 113.

13. The definition of ‘positive property’ or ‘quality’ is often debated in logic, since it is the basis for many logical proofs of the existence of God, from Leibniz to Gödel. See Wang, H., *A Logical Journey: From Gödel to Philosophy*, Bradford Book, Cambridge MA, 1997, p. 316.

the natural\* semiotic system (or semiotics of the natural world). In this sense, in the context of the generative\* trajectory of discourse, discursive semantics\* includes, with the thematic (or abstract) component, a figurative component.<sup>14</sup>

Provided that, as a signifier, 'absolute other' does not mean any  $\phi$  of  $\alpha$ :

(G):  $\psi(\text{OR}) \supset \text{N}(\text{t}, \pi, \psi) \sim \psi \in \alpha$

According to the formula, if a 'property' does belong to the object of religion OR, then there is a term  $t$  that is used in the class of profane sentences  $\pi$  as a signifier of  $\psi$ , and  $\psi$  does not belong to the class  $\alpha$  of the figures of the world of experience. Now, we define 'absolute other' as a signifier  $t$  whose meaning is 'other than  $\alpha$ ' for every  $\phi$ . In turn,  $\phi$  is a figure, belonging to  $\alpha$ , that can be identified as a reference point. Then, the signifier 'absolute other' can be considered a valid and consistent member of the religious discourse DR and can be used to predicate  $\psi(\text{OR})$  QED.

A comment on the definition: the alterity of God is mainly related to human language and other semiotic systems and, in particular, to their figurative component. For example, music does not seem to have the same problem signifying the divine. We can question the material adequacy of this definition of otherness for representing the totality of religious discourse. Bochenski doubts that the faithful could worship an entity about which they assume only that it cannot be ascribed any positive properties.<sup>15</sup> However, specific subgenres of religious discourse about the relationship between humans and God, such as mysticism and prophecy,<sup>16</sup> do underline God's alterity. For example,

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord (Isaiah, 55, 8).

God's alterity is not only cognitive, it is also linguistic. According to Scholem,

From the very beginnings of Kabbalistic doctrine these two manners of speaking appear side by side. The secret world of the godhead is a world of language, a world of divine names that unfold in accordance with a law of their own. The elements of the divine language appear as the letters of the Holy Scriptures. Letters and names are not only conventional means of communication.

14. Cfr. Greimas, A.J., Courtés, J., *Figurative*, in Id., *Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1982, p. 117.

15. Bochenski, J.M., *The logic of religion*, New York University Press, New York, 1965, p. 114.

16. While mystical writings are influenced by prophetic literature, the two should not be confused. According to Giovanni Pozzi, in mystical language the enunciator is passive, the reported experience is personal, and the self is annihilated to leave room for the expression of an unspeakable "other". On the contrary, in prophetic language the enunciator is active, the reported experience has a public character, and the self of the prophet is not dissolvable. See Pozzi, G., *L'alfabeto delle sante*, in Pozzi, G., Leonardi, L. (eds.), *Scrittrici mistiche italiane*, Marietti, 1986, pp. 28-29.

They are far more. Each one of them represents a concentration of energy and expresses a wealth of meaning which cannot be translated, or not fully at least, into human language.<sup>17</sup>

## 2. Rondalli's Padre Pio: a documentary about mystical writing

*Padre Pio da Pietrelcina* is Alberto Rondalli's second work, directed in 1997. According to the author,<sup>18</sup> the movie was taken off the market to support a second movie about Padre Pio, more popular and hagiographic, distributed by RAI in 2000 in view of the soon-to-be saint's beatification: *Padre Pio tra cielo e terra*, directed by Giulio Base.

During his training as a director, Rondalli came into contact with Ermanno Olmi and Krzysztof Kiesłowski, and their influence is clearly discernible in the movie. Rondalli's direction is markedly realistic, both in the southern landscape and in the spartan and austere interior of the convent. The 'light/darkness' opposition is technically highlighted by the use of chiaroscuro and 'day for night'.<sup>19</sup> Conventual life is represented by borrowing stylistic codes from the genre of historical documentary, including for extremely graphic aspects such as the self-flogging of the friars; indeed, these are always filmed from a distance, avoiding both morbid ostentation and moral judgment. Padre Pio, played by Antonio Buil Pueyo, is portrayed as having very marked southern Italian features and none of the stereotypical idealizations that can be found in hagiographic movies.

### 2.1. Syntagmatic parsing

The film opens with the apostolic visit of Mons. Maccari in 1960, the second investigation of the Holy Office into Padre Pio.<sup>20</sup> Padre Pio's previous life is thence represented in the form of a long flashback. The off-screen voice simulates a narrator and introduces five temporal and narrative ellipses. Consequently, we can subdivide the movie into six narrative syntagms:

- 1) 1960: the Apostolic Visitor  
- First ellipsis: introduces the flashback on Padre Pio's life
- 2) Padre Pio enters the convent, experiences his first mystical phenomena, and returns to his family due to illness

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17. Scholem, G., *On the Kabbalah and its symbolism*, Schocken Books, New York, 1965, p. 36.

18. Rondalli: il mio Padre Pio dimenticato, *Cinecittà News*, October 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, retrieved on October 26<sup>th</sup> 2020, <https://news.cinecitta.com/IT/it-it/news/53/15708/rondalli-il-mio-padre-pio-dimenticato.aspx>.

19. 'Day for night' is a technique used to simulate a night scene while filming in daylight.

20. The first apostolic visit of Mons. Raffaele Carlo Rossi on behalf of the Holy Office dates back to 1921 – see Luzzato, S., *Padre Pio: miracoli e politica nell'Italia del '900*, Einaudi, Turin, 2007, p. 117.

- Second ellipsis: Padre Pio moves to San Giovanni Rotondo
- 3) Transverberation and stigmatization (1915 - '22)
- Third ellipsis: the narrator summarizes the reaction of the Holy Office
- 4) The attempt to take the saint away (1923 - '25); a non-miracle
- Fourth ellipsis: end of the flashback
- 5) The apostolic visitor concludes his investigation
- Fifth ellipsis: the narrator outlines the new sanctions of the Holy Offices against Padre Pio
- 6) The death of the saint

At first glance, the simple temporal program of the syntagmas appears to be isomorphic to the narrative trajectory of the subject described by Greimas and Courtés:

It may be defined as a logical chain of two types of programs: the modal narrative program (called competence program) is logically presupposed by the realization narrative program (called the performance program), whether the latter be situated in the pragmatic or in the cognitive dimension.<sup>21</sup>

In particular, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> syntagma represent the competence program. Padre Pio is portrayed as a secret, non-revealed subject who is capable of entering into conjunction with the sacred because of his mystical experience. At the same time, he is a suffering, unwilling subject, incapable of fully understanding what is happening to him. The performance is represented by the 3<sup>rd</sup> syntagma; then, Padre Pio is revealed as a stigmatised mystic during the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> syntagma. This particular phase, called 'realisation' in narrative semiotics, is one of the most interesting features of the movie: Padre Pio is a defeated subject, not believed by the Holy Office and incapable of performing a miracle. Furthermore, the people of San Giovanni Rotondo trust him but they do not understand him. As we will see, the movie constructs the effect of his solitude even when representing his death, surrounded by other friars.

Nevertheless, we note a difference between this narrative trajectory and canonical ones. Padre Pio suffers and undergoes mystical phenomena. He is 'not-doing'. The mystical subject is *passive*: passion takes the place of action. At the same time, if we define 'abstaining' as 'doing not', Padre Pio is 'not-doing-not', that is, he is not trying to escape God's will. From the point of view of the semiotic square (Fig. 1) and to revisit the system of elementary semiotic oppositions,<sup>22</sup> Padre Pio represents the neuter term: 'neither doing nor doing not'.<sup>23</sup> In par-

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21. Greimas, A.J., Courtés, J., *Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1982, p. 207.

22. Ivi, pp. 308-311.

23. If S1 and S2 are an antonymic pair enclosing a category, the neuter term 'neither S1 nor S2'.

ticular, Francesco Marsciani distinguished between two types of neutrality: one as ‘indifference’ and a more radical form of non-relevance, and one as the neutralization of difference to escape any attempt at categorial determination.<sup>24</sup> The neutralised category in the movie is represented by doing; thus, the mystic is someone who tries to escape his role of subject of doing. This is consistent with De Certeau’s point of view according to which modern mysticism is characterized by an acquired or received awareness of a fulfilling form of passivity in which the mystic’s ego is lost in God.<sup>25</sup>

## 2.2. *Dialogue and Soundtrack*

The film’s sound choices are not mainstream. The extradiegetic soundtrack is missing, except for a recording of the composition known as Albinoni’s Adagio<sup>26</sup> that accompanies the credits. There is a diegetic use of Gregorian or litany chants, organ music and popular religious chants of the time, and even village band music. What stands out above all is the silence, interrupted only by noises ‘picked up’ in the foreground, such as the chirping of cicadas. Ecclesiastical Latin often appears in the foreground as well. Very often Padre Pio’s off-screen voice recites passages from his correspondence or from other compositions. For example, during his apprenticeship, he writes:

Similarly, even the most learned physicists, despite the rapid progress made in the natural sciences, admit certain occult qualities in bodies, despite their ignorance of their nature, as they openly confess. But if truths are given in created and corporeal nature that surpass human intelligence, why then cannot similar truths, which exceed human intelligence, be found in God, whose nature is infinite? And if God was able to manifest natural truths that lie beyond human understanding, therefore called mysteries of a natural order, why could he not manifest supernatural truths to us?<sup>27</sup>

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represent the negation of the category.

24. Marsciani, F., *Minima semiotica: percorsi nella significazione*, Mimesis, Udine, 2012, pp. 159-169.

25. De Certeau, M., «Mystique» in *Encyclopædia Universalis*, 1968-1975.

26. A neo-Baroque composition by 20th-century musicologist Remo Giazotto, attributed to Tomaso Albinoni.

27. «Similmente anche i più dotti fisici, nonostante i rapidi progressi fatti nelle scienze naturali, ammettono nei corpi talune occulte qualità, nonostante che ne ignorino la natura, come essi apertamente confessano. Ma se si danno delle verità nella natura creata e corporea che superano l’intelligenza umana, perché poi simiglianti verità superiori anch’esse all’umana intelligenza non si possono trovare in Dio, la cui natura è infinita? E se Dio ha potuto manifestare delle verità naturali, che superano l’umano intendimento, dette perciò misteri di ordine naturale, perché poi non ci potrebbe manifestare delle verità soprannaturali?» (Pietrelcina, P., *Epistolario, Vol. IV: corrispondenza con diverse categorie di persone*, Edizioni “Padre Pio da Pietrelcina”, San Giovanni Rotondo, 1998, p. 1051 – our translation).

This passage, quoted from Padre Pio's school notebook, is used in the 2<sup>nd</sup> syntagma as a prolepsis of the mystic phenomena he will experience beginning in the 3<sup>rd</sup> syntagma. As mentioned above, mystical phenomena are never directly portrayed in the movies. For example, Padre Pio is filmed as he writhes in bed in the throes of a nightmare. The following morning, we see Padre Pio writing to his spiritual director, Padre Agostino. The off-screen voice recites:

My dear Father,

I must tell you now what has happened to me during the past two nights. I had a very bad time the night before last; from about ten o'clock, when I went to bed, until five o'clock in the morning, that 'wretch' did nothing but beat me continually. He presented to my mind many diabolical suggestions, thoughts of despair, distrust in God. [here a passage of the original letter is omitted]. I really thought that was the last night of my life, or that if I did not die I should lose my reason. But may Jesus be blessed, for nothing of the sort occurred.<sup>28</sup>

The passage asks viewers to reinterpret the terrible suffering they saw as the manifestation of a mystical phenomenon: a struggle with the devil, identified by the off-screen voice as the cause of despair and mistrust. The off-screen voice represents mystical ecstasy in a similar manner:

Then, last night, I spent the entire night with Jesus in his Passion. I also suffered a great deal, but in a very different way from the previous night. This was a suffering which did me absolutely no harm. My trust in God increased more and more and I felt increasingly attracted to Jesus. Although there was no fire nearby, I felt myself burning within; although there were no bonds, I felt myself tightly bound to Jesus. I burned with a thousand flames which made me live and die at the same time. Hence, I suffered, lived and died continually.<sup>29</sup>

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28. «Babbo carissimo, ora bisogna che vi dica quello che mi è accaduto in queste due ultime notti. L'altra notte la passai malissimo: quel 'cosaccio' da verso le dieci, che mi misi a letto, fino alle cinque della mattina non fece altro che picchiarmi continuamente. Molte furono le diaboliche suggestioni, che mi poneva davanti alla mente; pensieri di disperazione, di sfiducia verso Dio [...] Credevo proprio che fosse quella propriamente l'ultima notte di mia esistenza; o, anche non morendo, perdere la ragione. Ma sia benedetto Gesù, che niente di ciò si avverò» (Pietrelcina, P., *Epistolario I: corrispondenza con i direttori spirituali (1910-1922)*, Edizioni "Padre Pio da Pietrelcina", San Giovanni Rotondo, 1971, p. 292, trad. eng. *Letters, vol. I*, Edizioni "Padre Pio da Pietrelcina", San Giovanni Rotondo, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 2012, p. 329). Padre Pio copies large excerpts from Gemma Galgani's letter to her spiritual director Father Germano dated May 22, 1901. See letter 63 in Galgani, G., *Lettere di S. Gemma Galgani*, a cura della Postulazione di PP. Passionisti, Società Tipografica A. Macioce & Pisani, Roma, 1941. On the debated relation between Padre Pio's and Gemma Galgani's writing, see Galofaro, F., *Il rapporto tra Padre Pio e Gemma Galgani*, in Pozzo, J., Galofaro, F. (eds.), *Semiotica e santità: prospettive interdisciplinari*, CIRCe, Turin, pp. 143-146.

29. «Questa notte scorsa poi l'ho passata tutta intiera con Gesù appassionato. Ho sofferto anche assai; ma in un modo ben diverso da quello della notte precedente. Questo è stato un dolore che non mi ha fatto male alcuno; aumentava sempre più in me la fiducia in Dio; mi sentivo sempre più attratto verso Gesù; senza nessun fuoco vicino, mi sentivo internamente tutto bruciare; senza lacci addosso, mi sentivo a Gesù stretto e legato; da mille fiamme mi sentivo bruciare, che mi facevano vivere e

The voice carries on explaining Padre Pio's wish for death and how his sins keep him from dying. The letter is a good summary of the principal themes of mystical literature, including self-annihilation to make space for the expression of the absolute other as presented in section 1. What is important from the point of view of the semiotics of cinema is the freedom granted to the viewer to decide whether the mystical phenomena are real. This is a feature of mystical writings, as it raises the question if whether the experiences being described must be considered signs of the divine. In the movie, the experience in itself is represented as authentic.

### ***2.3. Representing mystical phenomena***

Young Padre Pio's life is portrayed beginning from his entry into the convent. From time to time, the young man observes the crucifix (at night, or during collective prayer). He seems to move his lips, but it is not clear whether this is to be considered a conversation, an episode of confabulation, or a simple prayer uttered under his breath.

During his stay in Pietrelcina, Padre Pio is represented as a sick man whose lengthy masses are nearly unbearable to his fellow citizens. He is not integrated into the social fabric of his native village. Even the priest of the parish seems to barely tolerate him.

After his return to the convent, Padre Pio is exorcised by the friars. When he speaks to Jesus he is filmed in a close-up, with wide eyes and lips stretched in a stolid smile as if he were mad. We know that he sees something but we do not know if what he sees is really there because that which is being observed is located outside the frame, thus maintaining a regime of undecidability for the viewer.

Light also contributes to keeping Padre Pio in a regime of separateness. At 1h 01" there is a very interesting shot. Padre Pio's room is dark, and there are two lights: a warm one frames a friar who assists him and also allows the viewer to see a crucifix hanging on the wall, presented in profile; Padre Pio is instead surrounded by a cold light and, seated on his bed in a collected position with his face framed in a two-third profile, he raves, demanding that the devil go away.

Doctors witness Padre Pio's ecstasies. They note the poor health of his bronchi and do not know what to make of his delusions. In doubt, they send him back to the family. Hyperthermia is represented in the context of a 'mystical disease', charac-

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mi facevano morire. Quindi soffrivo, vivevo e morivo continuamente» (Pietrelcina, P., *Epistolario I: corrispondenza con i direttori spirituali (1910-1922)*, Edizioni "Padre Pio da Pietrelcina", San Giovanni Rotondo, 1971, p. 293, trad. eng. *Letters, vol. I*, Edizioni "Padre Pio da Pietrelcina", San Giovanni Rotondo, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 2012, pp. 329-330).



terised by perspiration and a persistent cough and accompanied by a spiritual crisis that can be interpreted, by the competent viewer, as a 'night of the soul'.<sup>30</sup>

Due to the crucial importance of Padre Pio's stigmatization, this element will be analysed in a separate section. The visit by doctor Amico Bignami<sup>31</sup> is told through the physician's report, read in his voice while he is filmed in the near-dark, in a dim light, looking doubtfully at the window and listening to a dog barking in the distance.

The first conflict with the Holy Office is recounted by the off-screen voice (3<sup>rd</sup> temporal ellipsis) and the rebellion to prevent Padre Pio's transfer from San Giovanni Rotondo (1923) is represented as a village festival: there is even a band. Nothing more than an outburst of noise that disturbs the silence of the convent. We see Padre Pio hearing it from a distance, in the solitude of his own cell. This stylistic choice locates Padre Pio and the people in two separate dimensions. Padre Pio is loved by his people, but is not understood by them because they do not share the same experience – indeed, we return to this problem in 4.1. As in Husserl's late writings, intersubjectivity is the condition of possibility for attributing to the other – here, in the sense of alter-Ego – the status of subject.

Furthermore, a non-miracle is represented in this syntagma: a young mother carries her dead son to Padre Pio in a suitcase. Shocked, he tells her that he cannot bring the child back to life, he can only pray for them both.<sup>32</sup>

Padre Pio obeys the orders of the Holy Office and celebrates mass alone, in isolation. He examines the crucifix with great intensity, in silence. Again, the viewer can only guess what is going through his mind.

Before dying, Padre Pio is represented lying in his bed. Four consecutive times he asks a brother assisting him what time it is. Strangely, the brother tells him that the time is 11 pm, then a few minutes past 11, then 11:30 pm, and finally almost midnight. The temporality of the filmic tale is distorted in some way. Padre Pio asks the brother to say mass for him the following day and to help him stand up. Sitting in an armchair, Padre Pio asks the friar to check if there are stars in the sky. When he is answered in the affirmative, Padre Pio's breathing becomes laboured. The friar

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30. Like modern catholic mysticism in general, Padre Pio's mysticism is deeply influenced by the stages of the spiritual journey as described by John of the Cross. In particular, the expression 'night of the soul' is used to describe a form of spiritual crisis.

31. Amico Bignami was the third doctor to visit Padre Pio. He was a famous scientist, known for instance for his description of the insanity of alcoholics, one form of which is today known as Marchiafava-Bignami disease. He was convinced of Padre Pio's good faith and explained the stigmata as a traumatic event that had been exacerbated due to an inappropriate use of iodine.

32. The miracle is not reported by hagiographies anterior to Cataneo, P., *I fioretti di Padre Pio*, Edizioni Dehoniane, Roma, 1988.

goes to seek assistance, and Padre Pio invokes Jesus and Mary. At this point Padre Pio is hidden from the spectator because he is surrounded by friars. We hear once again a passage from one of his letters in which he invokes death.

### **3. Carlei's Padre Pio: a hagiography in images**

To foster a better understanding of Rondalli's work, we will briefly compare it to a second TV movie, *Padre Pio* by Carlo Carlei, played in this case by the popular Italian actor Sergio Castellitto.

Both Rondalli's and Carlei's movies start with a long flashback from the inquiries of an apostolic visitor, a sort of 'anti-mediaeval inquisitor', a rationalist and zealot representing a Church reduced to a site of power, politics, and bureaucracy. The screenplay clearly suggests a simile between the Catholic Church and the Pharisees who persecuted Jesus.

Except for this weak analogy in the temporal programming of the narrative structure, Carlei's movie displays all the features of a fantastic, hagiographic tale. It aims to merge vernacular comedy and drama, using character actors borrowed from comedic movies and adding a generous dose of slapstick and gags such as the scene of Padre Pio's first baptism. The historical background (e.g. Fascism) is almost completely removed and the characters are idealised: for example, Emanuele Brunatto's acts of blackmail are somehow justified by his conversion and attempts to defend Padre Pio.

The soundtrack is intrusive, pleonastic, and sometimes extremely cheap – the acme is represented by a remix of Gregorian chants. The music seeks to inject drama to compensate for the slow pace of the story and the story itself is unnecessarily verbose, probably because it is a TV movie in two parts. Padre Pio dies in a crescendo of stringed instruments accompanied by a choir of angelic voices.

Carlei's direction is popular and replete with cliché: for example, the dramatic moments are represented in slow motion. A good comparison between Rondalli's and Carlei's movies is provided by landscape photography. Rondalli realistically photographs the southern countryside during Easter at noon, when the light is dazzling, the earth is dry, the nature is hostile and yellow brushwood dominates. On the contrary, Carlei represents an idealised, colourful landscape merging green fields and red bushes with beautiful speeded-up clouds passing by overhead.

#### **3.1. Hagiographic features**

From the point of view of literary genre, the presence or absence of certain syntagma can be considered an indicator on the basis of which we can classify biographic

reconstructions as history or hagiography. For example, the saint's childhood with its foretaste of the virtues of his adulthood is present in every hagiography, but it is missing from historical works such as Sergio Luzzatto's biography of Padre Pio.<sup>33</sup> For similar reasons, the presence of Padre Pio's childhood allows us to distinguish Carlei's hagiography from Rondalli's realistic documentary-style film. As in many hagiographies, the episodes of the saint's life are not presented in chronological order: for example, Padre Pio's stay at the convent in Venafro is represented after the military visit. Many episodes are invented or rewritten: Padre Pio steals the Madonna's gold to feed the poor; the dialogues of Agostino Gemelli's visit are a wholesale invention; and, like Christ, Padre Pio throws the merchants out of the temple. After the stigmatization, Padre Pio receives a medical report stating the supernatural origin of the stigmata as if it were a 'license of sainthood'. From the viewpoint of narrative structure, this scene represents the realisation of Padre Pio's performance program: from this point on, the movie does not spare viewers a single mystical gift, from foresight to bilocation, amazing healings and exorcisms. Padre Pio saves soldiers from grenades and civilians from bombs, and manifests the gift of being able to see the fate of the missing. While slander and persecution on the part of the Holy Office are the object of a pitiful ellipsis in Rondalli's movie, in Carlei's they provide the basis for well-known dramatic situation such as the 'erroneous judgment'.<sup>34</sup> The screenplay thus emphasizes this topic.

The kind of freedom to rewrite and reinvent the episodes of the Padre Pio's life to accentuate drama that characterises the 'television drama' genre is also typical of hagiographic stories. All of the features mentioned here are borrowings from hagiographic writing on mystical phenomena. However, there is a more specific photographic attempt to place Padre Pio's story in a hagiographic perspective: the use of Padre Pio's early iconography, an element which is inspired, in turn, by prayer cards.

### ***3.2. Comparing the spiritual combat***

One interesting point through which to delve further into the comparison is Padre Pio's fight with the devil. Generally speaking, demons are never represented in Rondalli's movie; they are instead evoked through quotations from Padre Pio's writings, as in the passages reported above (section 1.2). On the contrary, Carlei uses superimposed images to represent the devil. To create these scenes, Carlei borrows from the directing style and soundtrack characteristic of "B movie" horror films.

33. Luzzatto, S., *Padre Pio: miracoli e politica nell'Italia del '900*, Einaudi, Turin, 2007.

34. Cfr. Polti, G., *The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations*, James Knapp Reeve, Franklin, Ohio, (1916) 1921.

Rondalli represents the popular episode of the saint's fight with the devil in a minimalistic way:<sup>35</sup> first Padre Pio knocks on the door of Brother Anastasio's cell, then we see the empty corridor of the convent and hear a scream and a thud. The next day, in the cloister, two friars speak of a black dog said to have been sighted by a third friar (named Philip). They interpret it as a demonic manifestation of the devil. Once again, the viewer is called on to play an active cognitive role in deciding on the semiotic status of the event represented in the film.

In Carlei's movie, the episode is reinvented: Padre Pio is portrayed as a boy, praying under a tree. Suddenly, threatening clouds darken the sky. We see a 'point of view' shot of a mastiff galloping wildly towards the child, and the boy in turn runs and takes refuge in a hut of sticks like one of the three little pigs. In this way director avoids directly representing the devil, a choice reminiscent of a point of view shot of the monster in some B movies.

### 3.3. Comparing stigmatisation

The scene of transverberation in Rondalli's film is represented from the point of view of a child who is confessing to Padre Pio. Padre Pio simply appears to be in the grip of some kind of wide-eyed anguish, so much so that, if the viewer does not know of the episode already, it is difficult to understand why he postpones the child's confession. However, the viewer will still interpret it by semantic induction as a prolepsis for the stigmatization that follows.<sup>36</sup> The stigmatization itself is not explicitly portrayed: first we see Padre Pio in front of the crucifix, then there is a

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35. Padre Pio never mentions the episode in his writings. The documented biography of Padre Pio included in the acts of the canonization trial reports the story of the hound directly from the first hagio-biography of Padre Pio, written under an alias by Emanuele Brunatto, a con artist who promoted Padre Pio's cult from the 1920s onward: De Rossi, G. [alias Emanuele Brunatto], *Padre Pio da Pietrelcina*, Berlutti, Roma, 1926. Cfr. Ripabottoni, A., *Vita del Servo di Dio Padre Pio da Pietrelcina dei Frati Minori Cappuccini (1887-1968)*, in *Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servi Dei Pii a Pietrelcina, Positio super Virtutibus, Biografia documentata*, voll. III/1 and III/2, Tipografia Signum, Roma, 1997. However, the first chronological source of Padre Pio's fight with the hound is not Brunatto's book, but Father Luigi da Serra Capriola's deposition given to the Apostolic Visitor Mons. Raffaello Carlo Rossi, the Church official who investigated the mystic phenomena related to Padre Pio on behalf of the Holy Office. Father Luigi remembers having heard the story directly from Padre Pio: « (...) when he was still a student at Sant'Elia in Pianise, he saw a big black dog jumping from the window of a room where noises were said to be heard». After being declassified, the deposition was printed in Castelli, F., *Padre Pio sotto inchiesta*, Edizioni Ares, Milan, 2008.

36. According to Christian Metz, *post hoc ergo propter hoc* is a valid form of reasoning in the grammar of the movie. The assemblage of two frames creates a supplementary meaning, i.e. non photographic. Metz calls it *semantic induction*. See Metz, Ch., *Essais sur la signification au cinema*, Klincksieck, Paris, 1972.

temporal ellipsis, and finally an elderly friar notices traces of blood on the floor. A devotee, Nina Campanile, employs a trick to check for the presence of stigmata, giving Padre Pio a donation for the convent and then kissing his hands at length in a somehow erotic manner. The stigmata are represented as Padre Pio draws a regular, dark circle on the back of his hand, as in the photos of young Padre Pio. He modestly tries to hide the marks, but eventually everyone comes to know about them. The stigmatization is told in retrospect, once again through a voice-over reading of Padre Pio's original letter to his spiritual directors:

[...] I saw before me a mysterious person [...] His hands and feet and side were dripping bloodily. This sight terrified me and what I felt at that moment is indescribable. I thought I should die and really should have died if the Lord had not intervened and strengthened my heart which was about to burst out of my chest. The vision disappeared and I became aware that my hands, feet and side were dripping blood.<sup>37</sup>

In order to appreciate the meaning of the director's choices, we can compare this representation of syntagma with the corresponding one in Carlei's movie on Padre Pio. Carlei chooses to omit transverberation. First, Padre Pio appeals to the crucifix to tell him what to do about misery, as he finds he can no longer withstand it. A series of crossfades frame his face alternating with the eyes of Christ on the crucifix. The Golgotha is framed, shaded in a red tone, and then again Padre Pio's face with the same colour reflected in his eyes. The crucifix he is observing starts to bleed. Padre Pio feels a pain in his stomach and falls to the ground. Finally, he discovers he has been stigmatized – we see only blood on his palms, however, rather than actual holes. The soundtrack is symphonic and dramatic, in a minor key, with a wealth of strings and percussion.

The difference between the two movies consists in a problem of intersemiotic translation: the form of the content is preserved for the most part, but the form of expression changes from writing to moving pictures.<sup>38</sup> Rondalli's movie never represents mystical phenomena or the sacred, thereby underlining their alterity. As spectators, we are not allowed to see. Mystical writing is mainly used to maintain a constant state of ambiguity: is the event being represented a sign of the Divine? On the contrary, Carlei flaunts and emphasizes the sacred, embodying it in hounds, devils, and flames so as to satisfy the audience voyeurism typical of popular devotion. In so doing, he eliminates the ambiguous character of mystical writing. For

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37. Pietrelcina, P., *Epistolario I: corrispondenza con i direttori spirituali (1910-1922)*, Edizioni "Padre Pio da Pietrelcina", San Giovanni Rotondo, 1971, trad. eng. *Letters*, vol. I, Edizioni "Padre Pio da Pietrelcina", San Giovanni Rotondo, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 2012, pp. 1217-1219, in partic. p. 1218.

38. See Dusi, N., *Intersemiotic Translation: Theories, Problems, Analysis*, *Semiotica*, 2015, 206, pp. 181-205.

example, in his letter Padre Pio speaks of a mysterious person. Carlei explicitly identifies this person with the crucifix. In a similar way, in *Moby Dick* «the account takes care to inform us that Ahab had only one leg, but, as far as I remember, it does not say which, leaving us free to use our imagination». <sup>39</sup> When adapting the story for film, on the other hand, John Huston and Ray Bradbury decided to show the peg leg and so chose the left one. <sup>40</sup>

#### 4. Writing and phenomenon

Rondalli's movie avoids depicting mystic phenomena, leaving the viewer to question their nature as a sign of the divine. In the movie, we cannot see explicit mystic phenomena. Anguish, trembling, and disease are instead assembled as a coherent plane manifesting an absent sacred meaning: this link is produced by Padre Pio's mystical writing, recited by the off-screen voice. This semiotic work is aimed at producing a sign; <sup>41</sup> without writing, the sacred would be excluded from the represented world. A good example is of this is Padre Pio's transverberation: viewers cannot associate a sacred meaning with the image unless they already know this episode of Padre Pio's life from the hagiographies or his own writings. Rondalli's movie is thus based on a modal structure according to which we are not able to see the sacred on a visual level but, sometimes, we are allowed to infer it on a cognitive level. <sup>42</sup>

In Carlei's movie, on the contrary, mystic phenomena prevail over mystical writing and are represented from an objective or subjective point of view, as in the syntagma of the hound. They are constantly highlighted and pushed into the foreground so that the viewer is forced to see them. Only writing has the capacity to represent an absence, however. For this reason, in Rondalli's movie the evocation of an absolute alterity is effective to an utmost degree. In the other film, instead, such phenomena are exhibited as self-referential fetishes. <sup>43</sup>

There is a fourth possible way of linking vision and knowledge. In Rondalli's movie, the crucifix reappears in different scenes, sometimes a central position and some-

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39. Eco, U., *Kant and the Platypus*, Harcourt, London, 1999, p. 326.

40. Eco proposed this example in his doctoral seminar on intersemiotic translation held in Bologna in 1999. See Dusi, N., Neergard, S. (eds.), *Sulla traduzione intersemiotica, VERSUS* 85, 86, 87, January-December 2000.

41. Eco, U., *A Theory of Semiotics*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1975, pp. 151-313.

42. The four typologies linking vision to knowledge are the result of a classic ethnosemiotic inquiry into the regime of visibility of space by Marsciani, F., *Gli spazi della cura, E/C*, 2005, accessed October, 30<sup>th</sup> 2020 [http://www.ec-aiss.it/includes/tng/pub/tNG\\_download4.php?KT\\_download1=b14d58e48b912c234afb67377fdfe08a](http://www.ec-aiss.it/includes/tng/pub/tNG_download4.php?KT_download1=b14d58e48b912c234afb67377fdfe08a).

43. Regarding the notion of fetish as a self-referential, degenerated sign, see Volli, U., *Fascino: feticismi e altre idolatrie*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 1997.

times in a peripheral one but always underlined by subtle lighting. This element is a good example of figurative dissemination along the surface of the film. Due to this choice, the crucifix assumes a symbolic value. Does it represent suffering, atonement for the sin of others? Does it suggest, in keeping with the Catholic mystical tradition, that Padre Pio is an *Alter Christus*? Symbolic ambiguity has been analysed by Umberto Eco:

In the mystical experience, symbols must be tamed exactly because they are exaggeratedly ‘open’ – and their force must be controlled. It depends obviously on one’s religious and philosophical beliefs to decide whether this force springs from a Sacred Source, or is nothing other than the way in which an interpreter, idiosyncratically, fills up the empty container of the symbolic expression. Firth observes that the mystical symbol is a private one; the mystic is the ‘detonator’ of the symbol, but immediately afterward a public ‘elaborator’, who establishes certain collective and understandable meanings of the original expression, is needed.<sup>44</sup>

The symbolic presence of Christ thus allows us to see this fourth possibility for representing the sacred: it can be shown ‘privately’. We are not *forced* to see, as under Carlei’s direction; we are only allowed to see, provided that we are willing to do so. The stigmata that Padre Pio tries to hide from Nina Campanile and other friars belongs to this “private” dimension of the symbol.

To return to the opposition between writing and phenomenon, we can see how mystical writing represents what Eco calls the *detonator* while hagiography, with its showcase of positive phenomena, is a clear case of the public *elaboration* of private symbols. The function of Carlei’s movie is to elaborate the symbolic, while Rondalli’s direction is more respectful of the original taste for detonation that characterises mystical writing.

#### ***4.1. Portraying Padre Pio as an isolated person***

As noted above, Rondalli uses light and sound to locate Padre Pio in a separate dimension: his small cell becomes the listening position for the viewer as he or she hears the voices of Padre Pio’s fellow villagers coming from outside. It is compulsory that Padre Pio’s solitude be made explicit since the viewer, just like the other characters of the fictional world, cannot share Padre Pio’s experience. It is difficult to identify with Padre Pio: in phenomenological terms, we would say that the objective correlate of his experience does not seem to be part of the intersubjective world of common sense and this world, in turn, is a semiotic construction of culture. It is true that Padre Pio is considered a saint, and it is perhaps possible to feel reverence or even sympathy for a mystic, but not empathy. To support this

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44. Eco, U., *Semiotica e filosofia del linguaggio*, Bompiani, Milan, 1984, trad. eng. *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1984, p. 146.

statement we can draw on an argument from the debate among Edmund Husserl, Max Scheler and Edith Stein on empathy in reference to the formation of the community as a collective subject.

One of the main goals of Husserl's phenomenological research was to explain how a common world, valid for everyone, is constituted on the basis of the intentional relationship between a subject and object. Having reached a satisfactory answer, Husserl encounters an issue: how it is possible for the subject to grant its own status of subject to 'others'? How does 'Ego' come to see 'Alter' as an 'Alter-Ego'? To resolve this issue, Husserl invokes empathy. According to Husserl, empathy characterises the transcendental Ego: it is the condition of possibility of the Ego. Every Ego is an empathic subject, and there is always harmony in the community of Egos. Empathy involves the "abnormal variants of humanness", such as brutes and even some kinds of animals.<sup>45</sup> Husserl's point of view seems counterfactual in that it does not explain the social isolation of people suffering from psychiatric conditions, the discrimination against migrants, racism, and many other problems.

Husserl presents his argument on empathy in a fully developed form in his *Cartesian Meditations*, but the link between intersubjectivity and empathy can already be found in his winter course 1910-1911.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, it is not strange that this point was debated by his early colleagues and students such as Max Scheler and Edith Stein. In particular, Max Scheler disagrees with Husserl about the very possibility of a transcendental Ego. In Scheler's work, the notion of person located in the world replaces the notion of transcendental Ego.<sup>47</sup> Scheler also critiques the theory of empathy on the grounds that empathy presupposes that the other is identical to the subject and that they have common experiences. However, Scheler suggests, the other is possessed of a sphere of absolute personal privacy and is therefore irreducible to the subject. Regarding this point, Scheler quotes Edith Stein: we feel the quality of the other's sorrow without suffering with him,

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45. Husserl, E., *Méditations cartésiennes: introduction à la phénoménologie*, trans. G. Peiffer, E. Levinas, Almand Colin, Paris, 1931, trad. eng. *Cartesian Meditations*, Cairns, D. (ed.), The Hague, Nijhoff, 1967, p. 126.

46. Husserl, E., *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*, Kern, I. (ed.), The Hague, Nijhoff, 1977 (after *Husserliana* XXIII), trad. eng. *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, Farin, I., Hart, J.G. (eds.), Springer, Berlin, 2006.

47. According to Scheler, Ego can be represented as an object linked to a second object by the act, while the act in itself cannot be represented as an object. Scheler describes this mutual relation as a "Copernican turn": world-being is a "condition" of the *cogitare*. Cfr. Scheler, M., *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik*, 1913, trad. eng. *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values*, Frings, M., Funk, R. (eds.), Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1973, pp. 374-376.



the quality of his joy without ourselves rejoicing with him.<sup>48</sup> According to Edith Stein, there are two bases that can give rise to collective entities, and the first of these is empathy, as in her example of sharing grief. The second of these bases is mere instrumental relationships. In the first case the subject recognises the other as a subject, while in the second case the other represents only an instrument for the subject to reach his goals. Edith Stein uses this reasoning to draw a distinction between community and society.<sup>49</sup>

To return to the mystic, De Certeau writes that ‘making room’ for the other is making room for others since every ‘enlightened’ person is brought back into the group and carried towards the future, inscribed in a story.<sup>50</sup> It remains to be seen if this act of bringing the mystic back into a collective dimension regards ‘community’ or ‘society’, in Edith Stein’s terms. Jean-Noël Vuarnet uses the term ‘theopathic states’ to refer to the feelings described by mystic writings: a quite bizarre existential condition.<sup>51</sup> Like with schizophrenic hallucinations or the tragic experience of losing a child, not many people can share this ‘feeling-in-common’, as Scheler calls it.<sup>52</sup> Theopathic states are neither the source of involuntary ‘emotional infection’,<sup>53</sup> as in Scheler’s example of the cheerful atmosphere of a party, nor of an emotional identification,<sup>54</sup> as in the case of a spectator watching an acrobat. In Scheler’s typology, the only remaining case is ‘fellow-feeling’:

Here A’s suffering is first presented as A’s in an act of understanding or ‘vicarious’ feeling experienced as such, and it is to this material that B’s primary commiseration is directed. That is, my commiseration and his suffering are phenomenologically two different facts.<sup>55</sup>

Other people’s commiseration with a parent who has lost his or her child is only based on a vicarious feeling. The subject is isolated in that she or he is not mirrored

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48. Scheler, M., *Zur Phänomenologie und Theorie der Sympathiegefühle und von Liebe und Hass*, M. Niemeyer, Halle, 1913, trad. eng. *The Nature of Sympathy*, Routledge, London, 2017, p. 9, n. 1

49. Stein, E., Beiträge zur philosophischen Begründung der Psychologie und der Geisteswissenschaften, *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung*, 1922, 5, pp. 1-284, trad. eng. *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities*, in Sawicki, M., Baseheart, M.C. (eds.), *The Collected Works of Edith Stein*, vol. 7, ICS Publications, Washington DC, 2000. There is a third possibility: the passive mass, composed by individuals that are simply objects manipulated by a leader, on the example of Nazism.

50. De Certeau, M., «Mystique» in *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, 1968-1975.

51. Cfr. De Certeau, M., Panier, L., Hassoun, J., Vuarnet, J-N., *Le discours mystique: approches sémiotiques*, in *Documents de Travail et pré-publications*, series B, 150-151-152, Centro Internazionale di Semiotica e Linguistica, Urbino, 1986.

52. Scheler, M., *Zur Phänomenologie und Theorie der Sympathiegefühle und von Liebe und Hass*, M. Niemeyer, Halle, 1913, trad. eng. *The Nature of Sympathy*, Routledge, London, 2017, pp. 12-13.

53. Ivi, pp. 14-18.

54. Ivi, pp. 18-36.

55. Ivi, pp. 13.

by the collective experiences and feelings at the base of the community. In a similar way, the mystic's reputation for holiness (where present) cannot be confused with other people feeling and experiencing the same value-situation in common with the mystic with the same keenness of emotion.

#### 4.2. *Visual enunciation of the other*

Semiotic literature on mysticism identifies enunciation as the privileged locus of the relationship between the subject and an 'other' seen as irreducible to the former:

In particular, since European culture no longer defines itself as Christian, that is to say since the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century, we no longer designate as mystical the mode of 'wisdom' raised to the full recognition of the mystery already lived and announced in common beliefs, but an experimental knowledge which has slowly detached itself from traditional theology or ecclesial institutions and which is characterized by the awareness, acquired or received, of a fulfilling passivity in which the ego is lost in God.<sup>56</sup>

The subject of the enunciation is positioned in a passive, receptive state, allowing God to express Himself through the subject's voice and body. At the same time, God is never represented in a positive, defined manner:

The mystic therefore appears in paradoxical forms. Sometimes he seems to go to one extreme, sometimes to the other. In one aspect, he is on the side of the abnormal or rhetoric of the strange; on the other hand, on the side of an 'essential' that his whole discourse announces but fails to enunciate. Thus, the literature placed under the sign of mysticism is very abundant; often even confused and wordy. But this is to talk about what cannot be said or known.<sup>57</sup>

From the perspective of rhetoric, the paradox of mystical enunciation should be interpreted as an *aposiopesis*. The enunciator of the message asks the reader for maximum interpretative cooperation<sup>58</sup> and complicity to 'fill' an unspoken and unspeakable gap. This is why Padre Pio does not name the 'mysterious person' who visits him or give the visitor a shape. In visual terms, the same function is played by the narrative ellipsis of the stigmatisation.

We can understand the function of this self-censorship if we consider the effects of the visual representation and embodiment of the Sacred in Carlei's movie. While Rondalli's exclusion of the other maintains the represented world in a state of realism, Carlei's stylistic choices abolish the common intersubjective world of our experience and slide into supernatural and horror-filled excess. We can thus conclude that the exclusion of the 'absolute other' from the order of allowed signifiers

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56. De Certeau, M., «Mystique» in *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, 1968-1975, our translation.

57. *Ibidem*.

58. Regarding the notion of 'cooperative interpretation', see Eco, U., *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1994.

produces the intersubjective world by leaving out that which is mystic. At the same time, the viewer is located on the threshold of the sacred, in a paradoxical place where a modal possibility cannot become actual. The function of this exclusion can be compared to Lacan's considerations on the taboo of incest:

For this experience assumes its essential dimension in the tradition that this discourse itself establishes. This tradition, long before the drama of history is inscribed in it, lays down the elementary structures of culture. And these very structures reveal an ordering of possible exchanges which, even if unconscious, is inconceivable outside the permutations authorized by language.<sup>59</sup>

The *unio mystica* can be compared to incest in that it is the inconceivable union of the creature with the Creator. According to Pozzi,<sup>60</sup> the incestuous character of this union is uncovered in Gemma Galgani's writings when she imagines herself as Jesus' lover, being also his daughter. Pozzi notes that the lexicon of kinship is used in mystical discourse because it is completely relational, given that mystical experience is oxymoronic and lacking in positive objects. Like the 'absolute other', therefore, kinship lexicon represents a case of the rule (G) outlined in section 1.1: the words for kinship used in the class of profane sentences  $\pi$  are used as signifiers of  $\psi$ , and these  $\psi$ s do not belong to the class  $\alpha$  of the figures of the world of experience.

Our argument provides a clue for understanding why visual representations of the relationship between Creator and creature, as in Carlei's movie, produces a fantasy world in which common sense is abolished. In a similar way, according to Lacan, the *foreclosure* of the signifier 'name of the father' (i.e. the law) from the symbolic order produces a psychotic condition.<sup>61</sup>

The 'absolute other' of mystic discourse is not definable: *οὐδὲ λόγος ἐστὶν οὔτε νόησις, οὔτε λέγεται οὔτε νοεῖται*;<sup>62</sup> it is neither word nor thought, the object of neither discourse nor thought. Its negative character is reflected in mystical writing and the choice to avoid representing it visually. The exclusion of this other produces the world of definite entities and indicates its limit, a semiotic frontier that extrapolates to visual semiotics the Anselmian idea of *penuria nominum*.<sup>63</sup> The mystical subject, by virtue of being positioned outside this limit, is isolated from the world while worshippers are located on the border, in a region where knowledge of God presupposes not seeing.

59. Lacan, J., *Écrits: A Selection*, Routledge Classics, London, 2001, p. 113. Other analogies between mysticism and psychoanalysis are presented in de Certeau, M., *La Fable mystique, I. XVIe – XVIIe siècle*, Gallimard, Paris, trad. it. *Fabula mistica I, XVI-XVII secolo*, Jaca Book, Milan, pp. 6-9.

60. Pozzi, G., *L'alfabeto delle sante*, in Pozzi, G., Leonardi, L. (eds.), *Scrittrici mistiche italiane*, Marietti, Bologna, 1986, p. 40.

61. *Ibidem*.

62. Migne, J.-P. (ed.), *Dionysii Areopagitae opera*, in *Patrologia Graeca*, 3, Paris, 1857.

63. See Fedriga, R., Limonta, R., *Penuria nominum and language rectitudo: linguistic economy in Saint Anselm of Canterbury*, *Studia Anselmiana*, 2019, 178, 14, pp. 211-222.

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## Figures

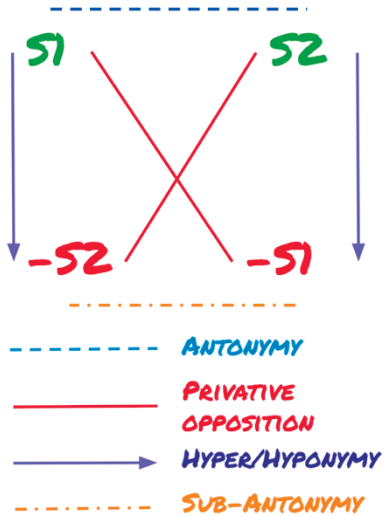


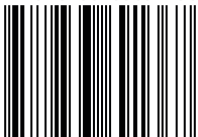
Fig. 1: semiotic square of oppositions. Source retrieved on October 26<sup>th</sup> 2020, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Semiotec\\_Square\\_\(With\\_Oppositions\).png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Semiotec_Square_(With_Oppositions).png).



Il *fil rouge* di Spazi e Tempi dell'Alterità è il contatto con l'Altro ravvisabile in prospettiva diacronica, intesa come *kronos* e *kairos*, quindi evoluzione cronologica e tempo della soggettività; si è voluto esplorare le visioni, spesso deformanti, dell'Alterità che hanno avuto, e hanno tuttora, forti ripercussioni sull'*imagerie culturelle*, sull'immaginario popolare e sulla vita civile. I testi letterari, così come le opere artistiche in senso generale, riflettono, in maniera diretta o mediata o ancora trasversale, le inquietudini e le tensioni che di sovente scaturiscono dalla relazione dialettica tra identità e alterità e gli elementi positivi oppure, al contrario, perturbanti che la contraddistinguono. L'Alterità può quindi delinarsi come sinonimo di diversità - di genere, religiosa, linguistica, esperienziale, etc. -, irriducibile/negoziabile, ma anche come fondamentale esperienza di conoscenza e riflessione nella formazione dell'Io.

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